# EXPLORING ETHICAL ISSUES IN YOUTH RESEARCH: AN INTRODUCTION

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## Introduction

This special issue is devoted to exploring some of the ethical dilemmas that confront youth researchers. Although scholars who conduct research with other social groups obviously have to engage with important ethical issues in their own work, there are a number of ethical issues that are often seen as specific to young people. As Heath et al. (2009) have argued, in general these relate to the contextual factors which differentiate youth research from other forms of social research. These can be identified as: the way in which the lives of many young people are structured by various age-related institutions and contexts and framed by age-related policies; the construction of youth as a critical period for development and transition, which often leads to widespread concern with the monitoring of young people's lives; and the relative powerlessness of young people as a social group within the research process, for reasons which are often specific to their life phase (ibid.).

The five articles that comprise this special issue cannot, inevitably, discuss all of the ethical dilemmas that may arise in youth research as a result of these contextual factors. When taken together, they do, however, cover a variety of geographical contexts and methodological approaches. The empirical research reported in the articles was conducted in Australia, Canada, the United States of America and three nations of the UK (England, Scotland and Wales), and covers the following research methods: online research, face-to-face interviews, telephone interviews, re-studies, visual methods and ethnography. In the sections that follow, we briefly introduce the five articles. We then outline three of the key themes that emerge

from the special issue articles. These address important issues in youth research, but also articulate with wider debates about the nature of ethical practice across the social sciences more generally.

**The five articles**

The first paper, by Brady Robards, discusses the ethical issues that he faced when conducting research on young people's use of two online social networking sites: MySpace and Facebook. He conducted in-depth interviews with Australian young people who had used one or both of these sites, and also carried out a discourse analysis of their profile pages on the relevant site(s). In his article, he considers the nature of such websites and, in particular, whether we should consider them to be public or private spaces. In addition, he explores the relationships he established with his respondents through the process of 'friending'.

Denise Hinton also considers some of the ethical ramifications of using new technologies in research with young people in the second article of the special issue. However, unlike Robards, she focuses on the use of one such technology as a means of data collection rather than the substantive focus of the research itself. She explains how she interviewed university students across Wales by mobile phone, and then discusses her concerns about the way in which her respondents often chose to divulge personal information in public places while being interviewed by phone. In doing so, she addresses some of the issues about boundaries between the private and public raised in the first article.

The third article, by Kristin Eglinton, reflects on research conducted with young people in Canada and the United States of America. In both locations, Eglinton carried out visual

ethnographic research – using methods such as photography and film-making (alongside interviews and participant observation) to understand the ways in which young people used popular visual material culture to construct their identities. Eglinton's article focusses on the tension between the 'field' and 'real life' which she experienced during her research – and which, she argues, led to various ethical dilemmas.

Karen Lumsden's article, the fourth in the special issue, also reflects on the ethical dilemmas that are encountered during ethnographic studies of young people – in this case, during year-long research in Scotland with young people involved in the 'boy racer' scene. As a participant observer, she researched young men (and some young women) who were involved in speeding, racing and other risky manoeuvres in cars. She argues that it is sometimes necessary for a researcher to immerse himself or herself in risky practices (or what she terms 'edgework') in order to understand the situated meanings of particular activities for young people. In her article, Lumsden reflects on the ethical dilemmas she faced as a result of her relationships with the young people, and of putting herself in a context within which she did not always feel comfortable.

The final article in the special issue, by Henrietta O'Connor and John Goodwin, considers some of the ethical issues raised through 're-studies' – following up individuals who were first interviewed as young people between 1962 and 1964. They explain how data from the original study on the 'Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles', conducted in Leicester in the UK by Norbert Elias, was found in an attic. They then recount their ethical deliberations as they explored whether they should use this data and, if so, the methods they should employ. They conclude with a call for researchers in general to make more use of longitudinal studies, to follow more lives from youth into adulthood.

## Themes and issues

### Using new technologies

Research on use of new technologies and/or through the means of new technologies is now common across many areas of social research. Nevertheless, it has assumed particular importance in youth studies: young people are often seen to be in the vanguard of new developments, and so much research has focussed on their appropriation of new forms of information and communication technologies. Furthermore, new technologies carry symbolic importance for many young people, and for this reason have often come under the researcher's gaze. This special issue includes two articles, by Robards and Hinton, which explore some of the ethical dilemmas which, the authors suggest, are specifically related to the use of new technologies – as the substantive focus of research (Robards) and the means through which data was collected (Hinton and Robards).

A central contention of both articles is that new technologies blur the conventional dichotomy between public and private spaces, which has important implications for the way in which research is conducted – particularly with young people. As noted above, Robards' research focussed on the online social practices of young people using social network sites such as MySpace and Facebook. He conducted discourse analysis of young people's online profiles, as well as in-depth interviews with young men and women who used social network sites. He suggests that, while conventionally in social life, audiences have been separated, and different 'appropriate' social performances have been given to these various audiences, social network sites collapse these performative contexts and require new impression management strategies. On the basis of this discussion, Robards questions whether individual web profiles

should be seen as archival sources (and thus treated as public in nature) or ethnographic material (requiring informed consent) or a hybrid form. He contends that such dilemmas are further complicated by the variety of privacy settings that are available within sites such as Facebook, and the relative lack of understanding of such settings on the part of ethics committees and, often, researchers themselves.

Similar themes are articulated in Hinton's article, which focuses on a new technology (the mobile phone) as a means of data collection, rather than a topic of substantive enquiry. She initially chose telephone interviews to generate the type of data she anticipated she would have gained through face-to-face interviews, at less expense. However, in her article, she argues that interviewing by mobile phone may have influenced the nature of data collected, and certainly raised a number of specific ethical dilemmas. Hinton describes how many of the young people in her research chose to be interviewed (through their mobile phone) in a public space – such as in a shared living area, a shopping centre and at a bus stop. In some cases, friends were even brought into the conversation to check particular facts. This, she suggests, is problematic for a number of reasons. It compromises the assurances researchers usually give to respondents about the confidentiality of their data, and young people may later regret their decision to divulge personal information in front of people they do not know. While Hinton concludes that, in retrospect, she should have provided her respondents with clear guidelines about how to protect their privacy during research interviews on mobile phones, she also argues that we should refrain from positioning young people as passive, dependent and in need of protection – and recognise that this particular method of data collection may have allowed respondents more control over the research encounter – by allowing more discretion about where and how information was disclosed to the researcher.

Relating to respondents

Several of the authors of papers in this special issue discuss, in a candid manner, the ethical dilemmas they faced when forming relationships with the young people involved in their research. Such dilemmas have been discussed across a wide range of areas of social research but are of particular importance in youth research where the power imbalances between researcher and respondent may well be significant – because of the likely age and status (youth/adult) differentials. Relationships with respondents are discussed in all five of the articles that make up the special issue – including the process of 'friending' in Robards' discussion of social networking sites. However, they are brought into particularly sharp relief in the two contributions that draw on ethnographic research – by Eglinton and Lumsden. Both authors describe how they struggled to find an ethically comfortable position for themselves in their research. Eglinton argues that she found herself occupying a liminal space between the personal and professional in her research with young people in the US and Canada. For her, establishing good relationships with the young people was important both to support the mutual exchange of opinions (upon which the research was based) and as a strategy for carrying out ethical research. However, her article eloquently describes the difficulties of forming close personal relationships with young people while being a researcher, and of struggling to achieve equality in relationships, while retaining a position of power (by virtue of being an adult). Conversely, drawing on her researchers with 'boy racers' in Scotland, Lumsden suggests that establishing close relationships with the young people one is researching can make it more difficult to analyse their activities in a suitably critical manner.

Both researchers discuss in some detail some of the tensions they experienced during their ethnographic research, which were intimately connected to the nature of their relationships with their respondents and established peer group norms. Lumsden argues that, through establishing close relationships with respondents, the researcher can become caught up in group behaviour and unwittingly drawn in to deviant activities (such as those pursued by the young people in her study, such as driving fast and sometimes irresponsibly). Similarly, Eglinton acknowledges that she may have inadvertently championed some of the more racist and sexist messages of the rap song lyrics reproduced by the young people in her research - not as a result of having been 'caught up' in group norms, but by choosing not to be overtly critical of them and allowing her research participants to represent themselves however they saw fit. She goes on to argue for closer examination – by ethnographers in general – of the point at which the youth researcher's stance moves from the professional into the personal.

## Using ethical frameworks

As most social researchers will be aware, there is now a substantial literature on the role of ethical codes and frameworks, which charts their rise over the course of the past two decades. While some scholars have argued vehemently against the imposition of ethical frameworks on the grounds that they serve to protect institutional interests rather than those of the research participants (e.g. Truman, 2003; Holmwood, 2010), others have suggested that they offer social researchers important resources (te Riele, 2012). There is, however, significant variation in the provenance of such codes. In Australia, for example, the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* (NHMRC, 2007) informs the ethical guidelines set by individual institutions. In contrast, in the UK, there are no national ethical guidelines. Instead, researchers are expected to abide by those produced by their institution and/or

professional association (separate codes are published by the British Sociological Association, the British Educational Research Association and the Social Research Association, for example). Moreover, in some parts of the world, there are no specific codes in place, and researchers often have to turn to foreign ethical and legal frameworks for guidance (see Tetteh (2012) for a discussion of conducting research with young people in Ghana).

The articles in this special issue provide a variety of perspectives – from different parts of the world – on how ethical codes can indeed help to shape ethical practice. They also, however, illustrate some of their limitations. O'Connor and Goodwin's article, that focuses on the 're-study' of individuals who were initially involved in research in the UK in the 1960s, demonstrates clearly how ethical norms have changed over time. O'Connor and Goodwin describe how, firstly, the original data from the 1960s to which they gained access, was not held in a form that conformed to today's standards: it was not anonymised and personal information had not been kept confidential. They were thus, initially, unsure about whether they should use it. Secondly, respondents involved in the original study had not been asked for explicit consent about being contacted in the future for any follow-up study – although this was alluded to in some of the information that was retained. As a consequence, the researchers were unsure about the ethics of approaching the original respondents. They explain that, given the absence of any ethical codes when the data were originally collected, they proceeded on the basis of evaluating the risks involved in any particular research decision, while also making 'best guess compromises' based on their assessment of good practice (informed by current ethical standards about reusing data and tracing respondents).

The evolving nature of ethical guidance is also discussed in a number of other articles in the special issue. The contributions by Robards and Hinton both emphasise the importance of paying attention to the new technologies young people use, and the implications these have for research practice. As discussed above, both authors argue that their experiences of conducting research with young people raises important questions about the extent to which current ethical guidelines are sensitive to the blurring of boundaries between the private and the public brought about by social media and other new technologies. Hinton's account of interviewing young people by mobile phone suggests that conventional notions of privacy may be inadequate to describe the ways in which young people engage in 'private' conversations (or research interviews) in public spaces. She argues that while such practices may allow young people to shape the research encounter in ways not possible through a more common face-to-face interview, ethical guidelines may be required to encourage researchers to ask young people explicitly (and before data collection commences) about their willingness to share personal data in public spaces. Similarly, while Robards acknowledges the value of the Australian *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research* in helping him to think through the ethical challenges of his own research, he also demonstrates how some ethical dilemmas emerged only after the research had begun. He thus emphasises the importance of situated ethical decision-making, and ensuring that ethical principles are applied appropriately in new, changing contexts.

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